NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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GENERAL SHERMAN'S APPLICATION OF MASS AND MANEUVER DURING THE BATTLE OF KENNESAW MOUNTAIN

by

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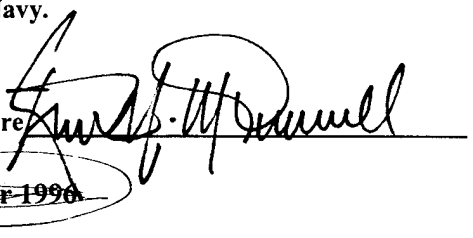
A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: 

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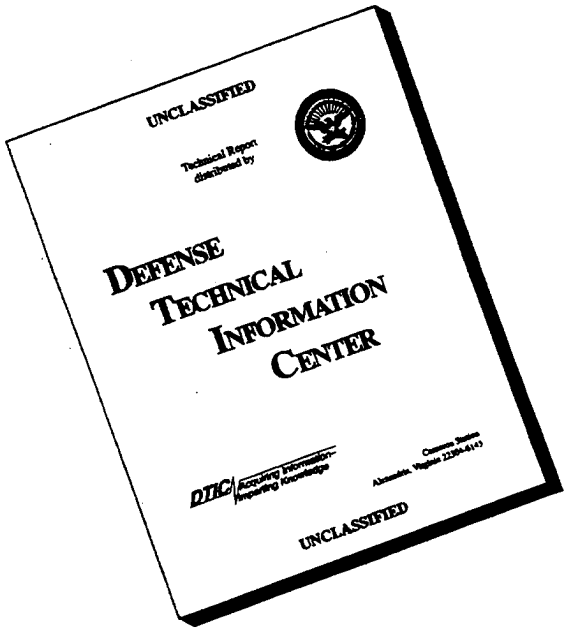

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The battle of Kennesaw Mountain was a critical event of the Atlanta Campaign for both the Union Army and the Confederate Army. General Sherman's poor application of the principles of Maneuver and Mass resulted in the Union forces loss of the battle and the senseless slaughter of several thousand of his own men.

In May of 1864, northern opinion had significantly soured against the war and most people simply wanted the war to end. President Lincoln and George McClellan, Lincoln's challenger, made it a presidential campaign issue. In the North, Lincoln's reelection depended on a decisive victory as soon as possible. In the South, Confederate President Jefferson Davis grew frustrated and impatient. Davis wanted a decisive victory in the south that would break the north's will to continue the fight.

General Grant instructed General Sherman to punch through the Southern defenses and capture Atlanta. Because the Army of Northern Virginia was doing so well, Atlanta's importance as a rail junction and manufacturing center began to take precedence over Sherman's primary objective of destroying the Confederate Army. Thus, Grant probably perceived Atlanta as the Confederate's strategic center of gravity. The capture of Atlanta would sever the logistical support of the Army of Northern Virginia and defeat General Joseph E. Johnston, the Confederate campaign commander, at the same time.

General Johnston was significantly outnumbered. His strategy was to conduct a classic delay and stall Sherman's advance toward Atlanta until the north simply lost the will to continue the fight. Johnston hoped Sherman's logistical tail would be stretched too far for him to sustain the offensive. General Johnston conducted no offensive operations during the campaign, which may be considered a significant mistake. Sherman outflanked the Confederate positions until reaching Kennesaw Mountain. At this point, he was hindered from successfully continuing his flanking maneuvers by weather, terrain and his own supply lines. This was Sherman's culminating point.

General Sherman failed to correctly employ the principle of maneuver by conducting a frontal assault on the well prepared Confederate defensive positions on Kennesaw Mountain. He failed to place the confederate forces in a position of disadvantage. Moreover, he significantly increased Union losses by ignoring the principal of surprise when he conducted his attacks during daylight. From their defensive positions on the mountain, the confederate forces could clearly see the approach of Sherman's forces toward Kennesaw mountain. Sherman further failed to consider the principle of mass by ordering his forces to assault the mountain with inadequate numbers and without concentration of combat power to penetrate Johnston's well fortified entrenchments. Although Sherman eventually pushed the Confederate forces back and seized Atlanta, he failed to destroy the rebel army and it therefore remained an offensive threat to Union forces in the South.

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The Strategic Setting

The Battle of Kennesaw Mountain was a critical event of the Atlanta Campaign for both the Union and the Confederate forces. This paper will examine the hypothesis that General Sherman's poor application of principles of Maneuver and Mass resulted in the defeat of the Union forces at Kennesaw Mountain and the senseless slaughter of several thousand of his own men. It will further examine the importance of the battle and lessons learned for today's operational commander.

By early 1864, the northern opinion had significantly soured against the war. Most citizens in the north simply wanted to quickly end the self-destructive path on which the nation was embarked. President Abraham Lincoln and challenger George B. McClellan made the war one of the major presidential campaign issues. The Democrats nominated McClellan on a platform that declared the war with the south to be a failure.[1] The political conventions adopted resolutions calling for peace negotiations. This sentiment gained so much momentum that some republicans despaired at the party's chances in the fall elections, and as late as ten days prior to the fall of Atlanta, President Lincoln predicted his own impending defeat to a few of his closest advisors. Lincoln's re-election depended on a decisive victory against the Confederates as soon as possible.[2]

In the south, Confederate President Jefferson B. Davis grew frustrated and inpatient as he watched the events of the war unfold. Aware of the public opinion in the north, President Davis wanted a decisive military victory that would break the

will of the North to continue the fight and eventually lead to the abandonment of the war. This developed into an obvious vulnerability for the North. Davis was encouraged as the northern support for the war hit a new low.

General Ulysses S. Grant decided that a strategy of attrition was the best approach. The Union Army would attack on two fronts. Previously, the Confederates sent reinforcements from an unopposed force to one that was under attack. The plan called for General George A. Meade's forces to fix General Robert E. Lee's army in the east, while Major William T. Sherman engaged General Joseph E. Johnston's army in the west. General Meade's army would deplete and attrit General Lee's Army of Virginia of valuable resources and prevent any sort of reinforcement of General Johnston's forces.[3]

General Grant instructed General Sherman to break up General Johnston's forces and penetrate the deep south to inflict as much damage as possible against their war resources.[4] Sherman's initial objective became the destruction of Johnston's Army, followed by the seizure of Atlanta (which General Grant perceived to be the Confederate center of gravity). This city was large and of great strategic importance and "northern public opinion measured victory in terms of cities taken at least as much as armies destroyed."[5] Atlanta comprised a junction of railways leading to Chattanooga, Richmond, the Atlantic coast and Montgomery, Alabama.

General Sherman decided to conduct the campaign based on repetitive flanking maneuvers. He would gain contact with

General Johnston's forces, pin them down and, by continuously outflanking them, Sherman would force them to relinquish their positions and fall back. If the opportunity presented itself to cut off Johnston's supply lines and isolate part or all of the Confederate force from the Atlanta umbilical cord, the job would be easy. Sherman's initial decisive point of the Atlanta Campaign became Johnston's Army.

Union Forces Begin the Move South

On May 6, 1864, General Sherman began his offensive operations with a movement to contact southeast along the Western and Atlantic Railroad. Terrain between Chattanooga and Atlanta favored defensive operations. Cross-compartments formed by ridge lines and rivers, coupled with densely wooded areas, added to the difficulty of the attacking forces. Reconnaissance by the cavalry and logistical support by wagon train were significantly canalized by the road net.[6]

Major General John M. Schofield, Commander of the Army of Ohio, secured the eastern flank. Major General George H. Thomas, Commander of the Army of the Cumberland, constituted Sherman's center. On the western flank of Sherman's force was Major General James B. McPherson, Commander of the Army of Tennessee.[7]

This began the Atlanta Campaign which ended almost three months and one hundred and thirty-eight miles later with the fall of Atlanta to the Union forces. Meanwhile, about twenty-five miles to the south, General Johnston's forces had prepared strong

defensive positions north of Dalton, Georgia, on top of Rocky Face Ridge and across Crow Valley.[8] (SEE ANNEX A)

General Sherman's lead elements made contact with the Confederate forces on May 7, 1864. Intelligence reports of Confederate strength and disposition of forces convinced Sherman that a frontal attack would not be effective because the Confederate defensive positions were very strong. Sherman knew that the most exploitable vulnerabilities of the Confederate forces were their supply lines that extended from Atlanta and their reliance on the Western and Atlantic Railroad.[9]

On May 8, General Sherman conducted a feint against the Confederate forces arrayed on Rocky Face Ridge and launched a flanking attack toward Resaca from the west, hoping to cut the Confederate lines of supply. Sherman's forces suffered massive causalities and achieved no significant tactical gain. General McPherson, Union Commander of the Army of the Tennessee, conducting the flanking attack from the right, managed to breach the Snake Creek Gap and threatened to cut General Johnston's lines of communications, causing Johnston's forces to fall back.

In this initial engagement, General Sherman had successfully used the principle of maneuver to eject a force with an excellent defensive positioning.[10] (SEE ANNEXS A&B)

As General Sherman reinforced General McPherson's flanking forces, Johnston became alarmed and impulsively withdrew the remainder of the Confederate forces to Resaca. The Union Army pursed, but was unable to close with the retreating Confederate forces. By May 13, General Sherman had located Johnston's exact

position through heavy skirmishing and probing. The Confederate forces defended along a four-mile arc on a range of rugged hills north and west of Resaca.[11] (SEE ANNEX C)

At dawn on May 14, General Sherman engaged the majority of his forces against the Confederate positions across a three mile front. Simultaneously, General Thomas Sweeney's division began a wide flanking movement to threaten General Johnston's lines of communication. Once again, Sherman's forces, which were conducting the frontal assault, suffered high casualties and failed to penetrate the Confederate defense. But, General Sweeney's flanking movement managed to threaten Johnston's rear area and forced a Confederate withdrawal.[12]

Over the next month, both forces repeated this sequence of events several times. Sherman's frontal assault feints consistently suffered disproportionate casualties when compared to the flanking forces and failed to achieve any significant gain. Sherman's flanking maneuvers continuously threatened to isolate individual units or sever Confederate lines of communications. The result was always the same: the Confederates steadily withdrew southward toward Atlanta after each encounter. (SEE ANNEX A&D)

Preparation Around Kennesaw

General Johnston halted his retreat on 19 June and established a strong defensive position on Kennesaw Mountain, a natural citadel that commanded the terrain for miles in every direction. There was no easy way to push the Confederate forces

off Kennesaw, but Sherman felt he had no choice but to press the attack. He could not allow a lull in the momentum of the campaign.[13]

Kennesaw Mountain is a seven hundred foot mass consisting of two peaks with a small gorge running across the top. The mountain is separated from all other mountain ranges in the area. It offered superb observation of Sandhill Road which was used by Union forces for moving supplies and provided them unequaled fields of fire. This advantage allowed the Confederate artillery batteries to dominate all Union activities within the range of their weapons.[14]

General Sherman conducted extensive probes into Johnston's lines from 19 to 21 June. Every Union probe consistently met stiff Confederate resistance. In addition to the probes, Sherman sent General Schofield's corps on a flanking march to bypass Johnston's forces in the south.[15]

From the top of Kennesaw Mountain, General Johnston quickly detected General Schofield's movements in the south and sent General Hood's corps to reinforce the left flank. Upon securing the confederate flank, Hood immediately launched a preemptive counterattack on Schofield's forces. The Union Army repelled General Hood's attack, but the rapid movements of Hood's forces from one flank to another significantly effected General Sherman's next move. Sherman was convinced that another Confederate shift would block any additional attempts to flank Johnston's position. Sherman was also concerned that a wide

flanking movement would overextend his own lines of communication.[16] (SEE ANNEX E&J)

Two weeks of rain had brought Sherman's army to a standstill and prevented him from further maneuver. In the low ground, intermittent streams and creeks were transformed into formidable swamps that precluded movement by an attacking force and offered a natural obstacle in favor of the defending forces. His problems were exacerbated by the effect this weather had on his resupply efforts. Part of his army had extended itself so far across the swampy terrain and from the railroad that the wagons could no longer supply it. Sherman believed that Johnston would expect another flanking movement and would extend the Confederate line, allowing his center to be vulnerable. Sherman thought it intolerable to wait for better weather and knew the morale of his soldiers was low. Strategically, he was concerned that delaying offensive operations might ultimately lead to President Lincoln's defeat in the elections. Therefore, Sherman decided to conduct a frontal assault on Kennesaw, with a feint to the north and a demonstration to the south. (SEE ANNEX F&J)

Until reaching Kennesaw Mountain, General Sherman had tried to refrain from conducting massive frontal assaults on the Confederate breastworks. He hoped Johnston's forces were so spread out over an extended front that the Confederate center would be vulnerable to a frontal assault. Sherman believed his efforts would prove to Johnston that he must fortify and man the Confederate breastworks well, because he would pursue the attack from every possible angle.[17]

On 24 Jun, General Sherman issued his plan for the battle which would commence at 0800 hours on June 27, 1864. Sherman was counting on Johnston's anticipation of another flanking movement. Sherman decided that a direct attack would achieve surprise and penetrate the Confederate center. General McPherson would conduct feints against Johnston's northern flank while General Schofield would conduct a diversionary attack against the southern flank. The flanking attacks were expected to extend Johnston's lines and draw forces away from his center with a secondary attack just north of Kennesaw Mountain. Both the main and secondary attacks were to penetrate the weakened lines and seize the Western and Atlantic Railroad just south of Marietta. If Sherman's plan succeeded, he could cut off and destroy Johnston's army.[18] (SEE ANNEX F&J)

The Battle Begins

On June 26, the day before the battle, General Schofield tried to draw Confederate forces toward his area south of Kolb's farm. Confederate cavalry and a battery of field guns pinned down a brigade from one of his divisions. Another brigade managed to cross Olley's Creek but was forced to entrench of the far bank. Johnston closely watched Schofield's progress and decided that his southern flank was still secure. He neither extended south nor shifted forces to reinforce the flank.[19]

Following Sherman's instructions, General McPherson conducted a feint attack at 0800 hours on 27 June against

Johnston's northern defensive positions across a one and a half mile front. The Confederates held their positions in strength. Johnston's forces easily halted Brigadier General Leggett's division, the main effort of General McPherson's feint, which attacked south along Bell's Ferry Road. Four Confederate artillery batteries and heavy musket fire halted every Union advance.[20] (SEE ANNEX G&J)

On the northern edge of Big Kennesaw, thick vegetation and rough terrain prevented any organized assault. General Gresham's corps, one of McPherson's supporting efforts for the feint, was never able to commit a coordinated force against the Confederate defenses. General Sweeney's feints against the face of Big Kennesaw, the other supporting effort of McPherson's feint, were somewhat more successful, but never seriously threatened the Confederate defensive positions. The steep and rugged face of Kennesaw made it impossible to reinforce a Union advance before a Confederate shift of forces could repulse it.[21] (SEE ANNEX G&J)

The remainder of McPherson's forces simultaneously conducted the battle's second attack. The attacking force, commanded by BG Morgan Smith, comprised three brigades and numbered only 5,500 infantrymen. The three brigades assaulted abreast following a fifteen minute artillery preparation.

BG Giles A. Smith's Brigade, conducting a frontal assault of Pigeon Hill, became bogged down in the swampy area forward of its objective. His force suffered substantial damage from snipers and artillery before reaching dry ground. Small disorganized elements of the brigade moved uphill into well entrenched

artillery and infantry fire. The assault failed and Smith's forces withdrew.

One Union brigade, attacking just south of Hickory Road, routed the inexperienced 63rd Georgia Regiment from it's skirmish line. But, just before Union forces could exploit the situation, Confederate forces spotted the Union movement from their observation post on Little Kennesaw. The Confederates directed a deadly crossfire from artillery on Little Kennesaw and accurate rifle fire from the forward slope of Pigeon Hill into the Union attacking forces. In minutes, Union soldiers were forced to withdraw.[22] (SEE ANNEX H&J)

Meanwhile, on the northern flank of the attack, General Walcutt's small brigade struggled up the draw between Little Kennesaw and Pigeon Hill. A combination of extremely difficult terrain, Confederate obstacles, and heavy rifle fires halted Walcutt's brigade well short of the draw's crest. Walcutt's men conducted a difficult withdrawal under the suppressive fires of the 46th Ohio's rapid-firing, Spencer, repeating rifles. In just two hours, all three brigades in the secondary attack withdrew under fire. Union casualties were nearly 850, while Confederate losses numbered 186.[23] (SEE ANNEX H&J)

To the south of General Walcutt's forces and around Cheatham Hill, General Thomas selected a small wooded ridge for the location of his main attack. Thomas planned to attack General Cheatham's forces with two divisions abreast and held a large force in reserve. Upon penetrating Johnston's line, Thomas' reserves were to drive through the breech and seize the Western

and Atlantic Railroad to the Confederate rear. Thomas' division commanders, General Davis and General Newton, began preparing for the assault before sunrise. Davis would send his division against the southern edge of the salient while Newton's division simultaneously attacked the salient's northern flank.[24] (SEE ANNEX I&J)

Davis and Newton were both running behind schedule and failed to launch the main attack at nine o'clock. The Union's artillery preparation had ceased firing thirty minutes earlier, so the attack started by firing two cannons from the line. This served only to defeat the element of surprise and alert the Confederate forces that an attack was imminent.[25]

Newton's division rapidly closed with the Confederates lines in tight regimental columns. At forty yards, the Confederate cannons opened fire on Newton's front. Pounding artillery and heavy rifle fire forced the Union regiments to redeploy on line for their final assault. Thick vegetation and heavy Confederate fire blocked two Union attempts to breach Confederate lines. Newton committed the brigade held in reserve to reinforce the stalled division attack. With the bulk of the Union division already pinned down, Confederate fires quickly shifted to Newton's approaching reserve which fell back before it could fully deploy. Newton gave up hope of penetrating the Confederate line and entrenched the division in place.[26]

General Davis' division was equally unsuccessful. Davis attacked with two brigades. Colonel McCook's brigade conducted a frontal assault with successive regiments in column. The other

brigade, commanded by Colonel Mitchell, conducted a wheeling attack against the southern flank of the salient.

McCook's four successive regimental attacks breached the Confederate lines. Several times they reached the top of the breastworks, but were beaten back during brutal hand to hand fighting. During this struggle McCook and his successor were mortally wounded and the remaining leaders decided the only choice was to withdraw. Retreating to the woods was not an option because it exposed the withdrawing soldiers to concentrated artillery and rifle fires.[27] The surviving soldiers took cover in some dead space about thirty yards from the Confederate breastworks. They dug in and remained for nearly a week surrounded by decaying bodies.[28] (SEE ANNEX I&J)

Mitchell's brigade, conducting a supporting attack to the south of Davis, neatly maneuvered within forty yards of the salient's flank. However, on command, a waiting Tennessee regiment and two Confederate batteries opened fire. Mitchell's lead brigade was decimated and began retreating through the trailing units. Command and control disintegrated and Mitchell's entire force spontaneously surged against the Confederate lines. The Confederate defenses easily halted the uncoordinated assault. Mitchell, like Newton, determined further assaults were hopeless and entrenched his division in place. The main attack failed in less than thirty minutes of fighting. General Thomas achieved no tactical advantage whatsoever and lost nearly 1800 men.[29]

Lessons Learned

From the beginning of the campaign, General Sherman chose to effectively maneuver Johnston out of position after position, rarely considering frontal or direct assaults as feasible. As a result, Sherman suffered few causalities compared to the battles between General Grant and General Lee. But at Kennesaw, Sherman launched a delusive assault, "rationalizing afterwards that he simply wanted to remind his men of the cost of such as action (as if they didn't know)."[30]

But for all its apparent futility, General Sherman's decision to attack into the strength of the Confederate defense was not without reason. The strategic and political situation mandated that he act with speed. His objective was the destruction of Johnston's Army and the capture of Atlanta. Sherman steadily pushed the Confederates southward but failed to inflict damage on Johnston's forces. General Sherman believed anything less than unconditional surrender represented failure. The longer Johnston intact, the more likely a negotiated peace became. General Johnston fought the "classic delay" by trading space for time. He had hoped he could stall the Union advance into the South until the presidential elections.

The method by which General Sherman applied the principles of mass and maneuver resulted in his defeat. The principle of mass requires concentration of superior combat power at a decisive place and time. Synchronizing those effects where they will have a decisive impact on an enemy force in the shortest amount of time is to achieve mass. Massing effects, rather than

concentrating forces, can enable numerically inferior forces to achieve decisive results, while limiting exposure to enemy fire.[31]

Sherman failed to achieve mass. He committed only 20 percent of his force of 100,000 to the assault and held the rest in reserve. He weighted his main attack with 8,000 soldiers and his secondary attack with 5,500.[32] These forces were fighting comparative forces in well fortified positions.

Preparatory artillery fires were not synchronized with the infantry to produce an effective combined arms effort. Morgan Smith's brigades did not begin their assault of Pigeon Hill until Thomas' 130 cannons ceased firing at 0815 hours, and the main attack did not commence until 0900 hours. This lull only served to warn the Confederates that an attack was imminent. Had the coordinated efforts to combine to mass firepower and manpower, the infantry could have moved forward under the protection of artillery suppressive fire.

Davis and Newton concentrated their forces but did not mass their effects when they attacked Cheatham Hill. They arrayed their divisions into columns and lines of massed regiments, believing that such closely packed formations could overwhelm and penetrate the Confederate line. Instead, they exposed their massed forces to concentrations of enemy fire. They also limited the effectiveness of their own fires by masking the shots of those in the rear ranks.

Effective maneuver places the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power.[33]

Sherman's earlier flanking movements serve as a proper example of the application of the principle of maneuver.

The form of maneuver least recommended is the frontal attack. The frontal attack strikes the enemy across a wide front and over the most direct approaches. It is normally used when commanders possess overwhelming combat poser and the enemy is at a clear disadvantage. The frontal attack is useful for overwhelming light defenses or disorganized enemy forces and can be used as a fixing force to support an envelopment.[34]

Sherman decided to conduct a frontal attack of Kennesaw Mountain against a firmly entrenched force. He held neither a positional nor a numerical advantage over his opponent. To achieve success, Sherman's diversionary attacks at the Confederate flanks would have had to draw the enemy away from the center. With a weakened center, the frontal attack could have achieved success if Union forces had maintained surprise. Although it was his original intent, Sherman's failure to synchronize the diversionary and main attacks did not deceive Johnston into shifting his forces and only notified them of the attack. Thus, Sherman's forces attacked well fortified positions.

Sherman's failure to move against Johnston's flanks, while keeping Thomas' main effort back, prevented Johnston's need to reinforce his flanks. Had Sherman done so, he could have launched the frontal attack and surprised the thinning front lines.

Because Sherman's attacks were poorly timed and because he violated the principles of mass and maneuver, Sherman failed to achieve his objectives in a timely manner. This failure caused his defeat and the senseless sacrifice of 3000 Union soldiers.

General Sherman suffered a tactical defeat at Kennesaw Mountain, but the battle had no real decisive impact on the outcome of the campaign. Sherman capitalized on Schofield's successes on Johnston's southern flanks by disengaging McPherson and sending him to reinforce the flanking maneuver. Johnston recognized this as a real threat and withdrew his forces to Smyrna.

Conclusion

Sherman had learned his Kennesaw lesson and returned to the flanking maneuver that had served him so well previously. He quickly turned Johnston out of his Smyrna line, the Chattahoochee, and finally faced him around Atlanta. An outraged President Jefferson Davis replaced General Johnston with General Hood, and after a series of engagements, Atlanta fell on 1 September, 1864. Although the importance of Atlanta's demise can't be underestimated, General Sherman did not accomplish one of his main objectives: destroying his opponent. The Confederate force had been left in tact, allowed to slip away on the outskirts of Atlanta and remained an offensive threat to the Union forces.

The fall of Atlanta had great operational and strategic impact. The fall of Atlanta was most significant for the boost (and ultimate victory) it gave to Abraham Lincoln's chances of reelection. It denied the south a significant industrial and logistics base and negated its importance as a railroad junction. Additionally, it had a significant psychological impact on the will of the south to continue to prosecute the war.

The battle of Kennesaw Mountain had an immediate and lasting effect on the remainder of the war. The horrific loss of life showed both sides that attacking in massed Napoleonic formations against a firmly entrenched enemy was senseless. The volume and devastating effects of modern weaponry made it far too costly. Furthermore, the battle serves as an example of how a unit can only achieve success by properly concentrating the effects of firepower and manpower, coupled with the flexible use of maneuver, to strike the enemy at a decisive place and time.

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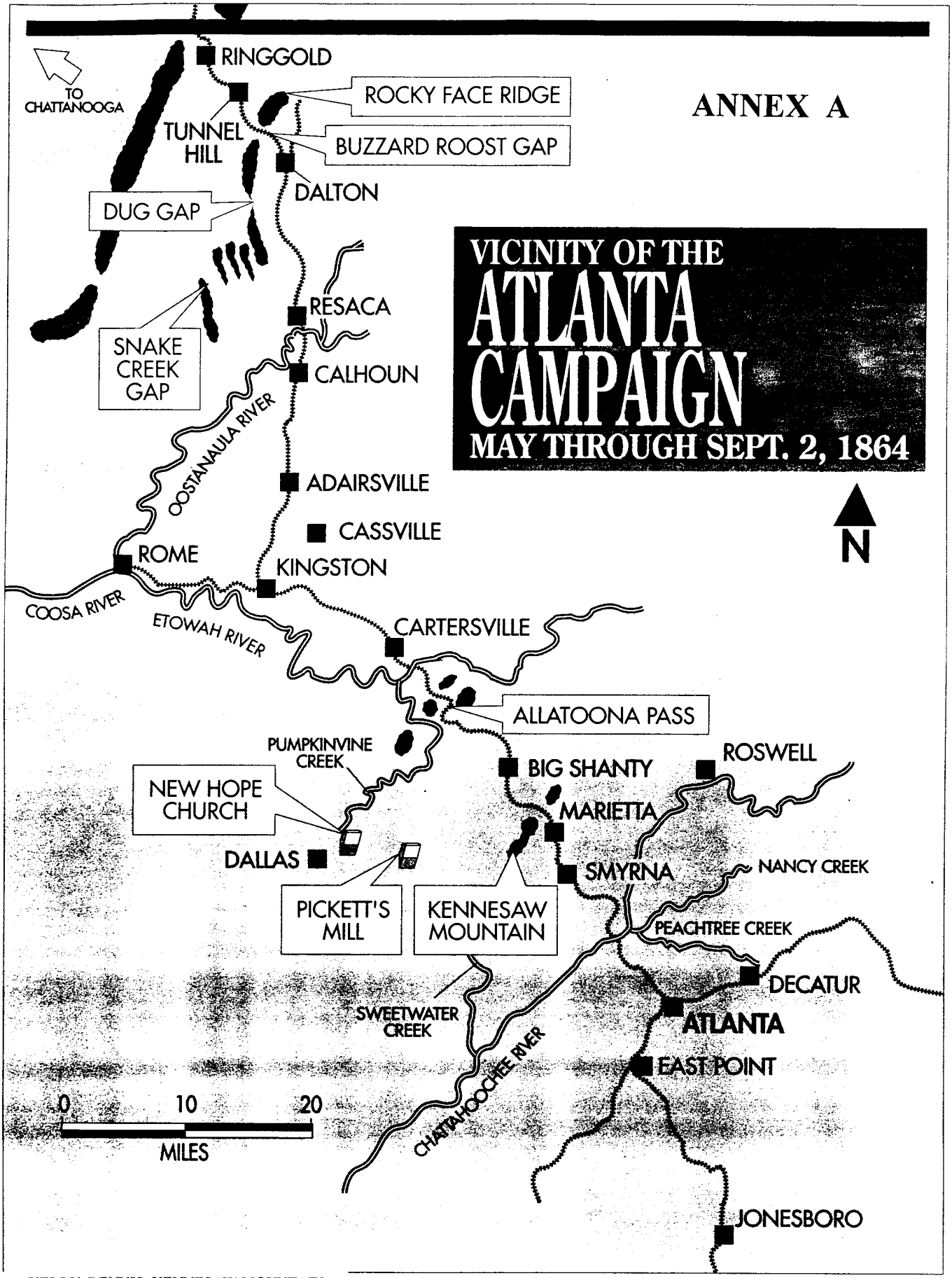

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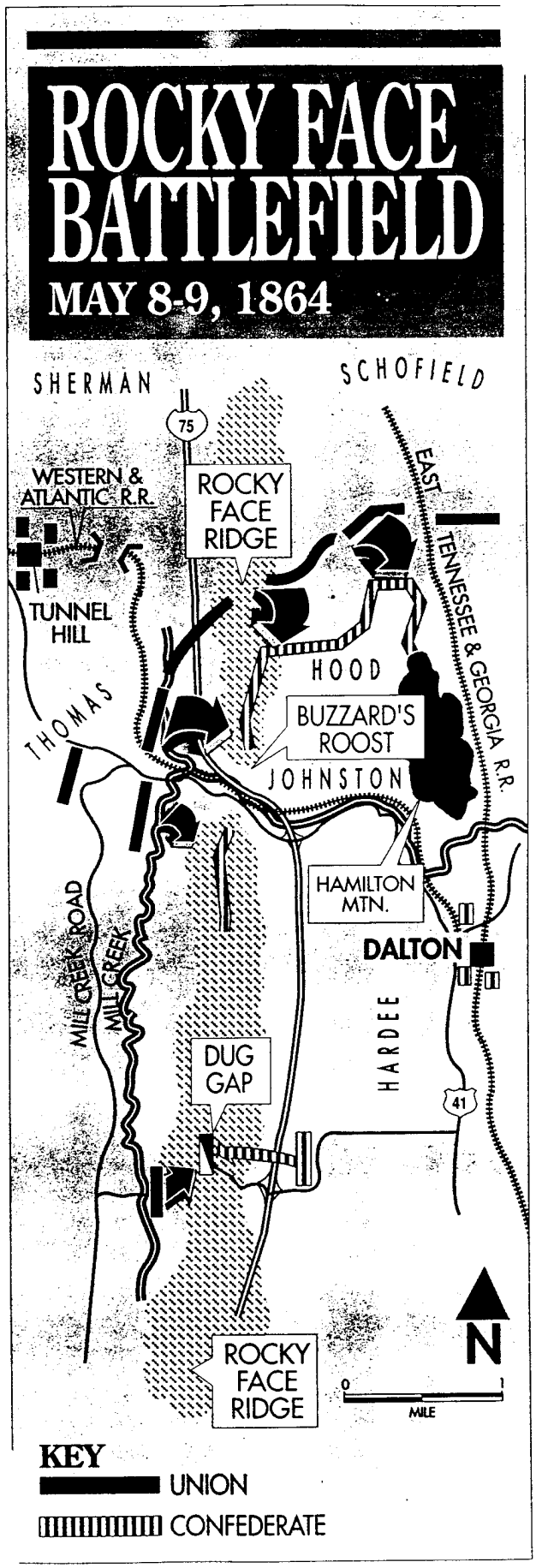
ANNEX B



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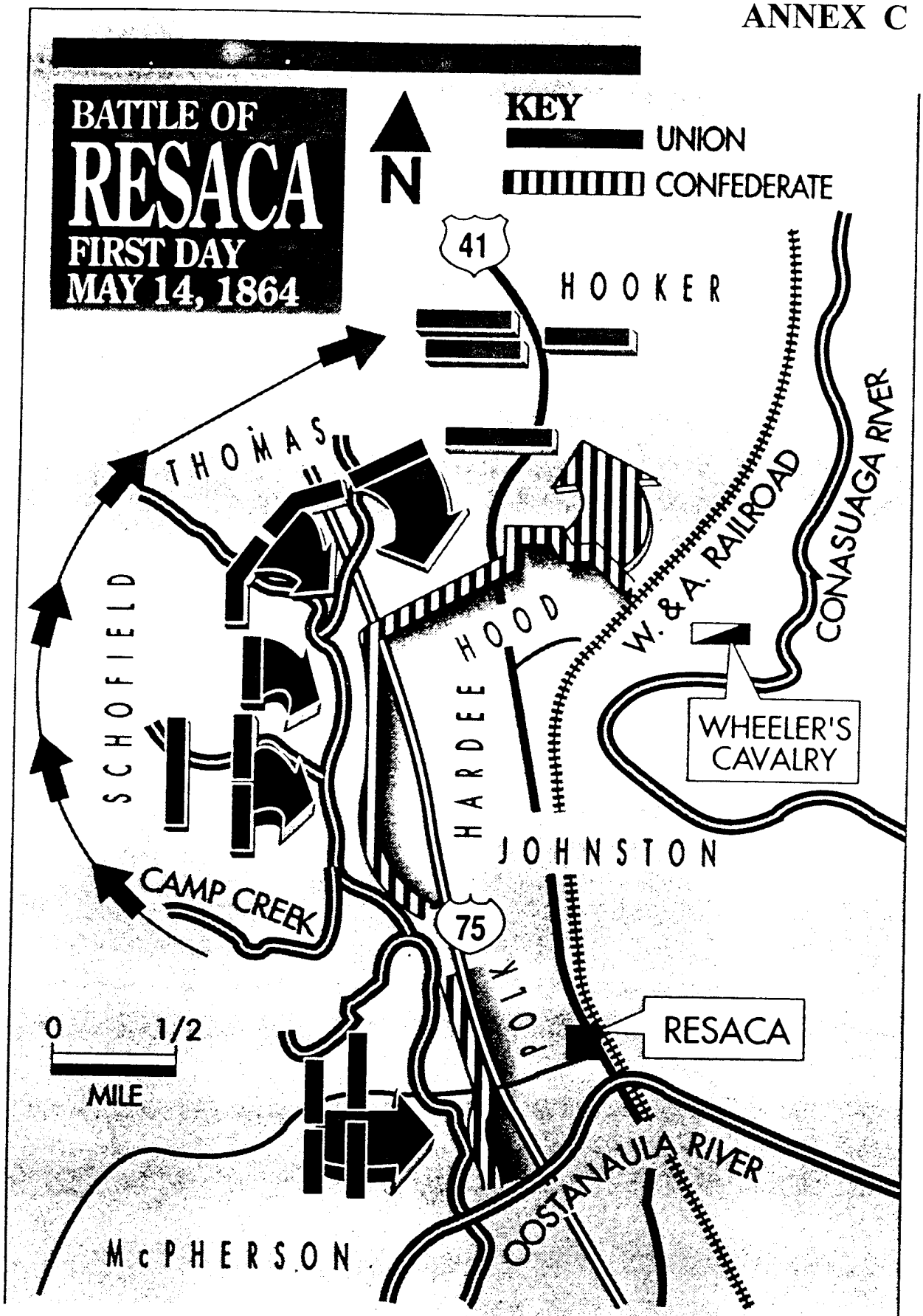
ANNEX C



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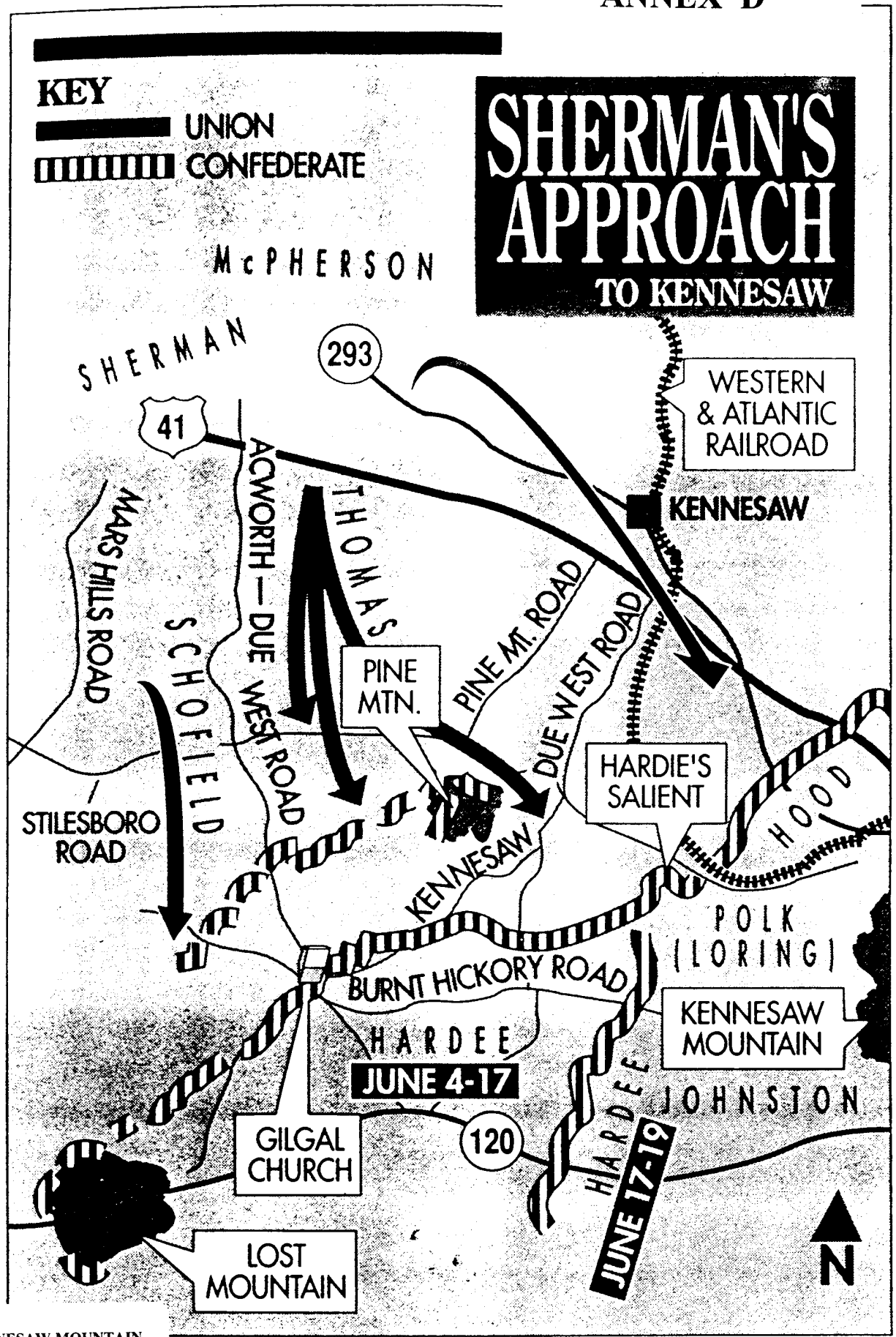

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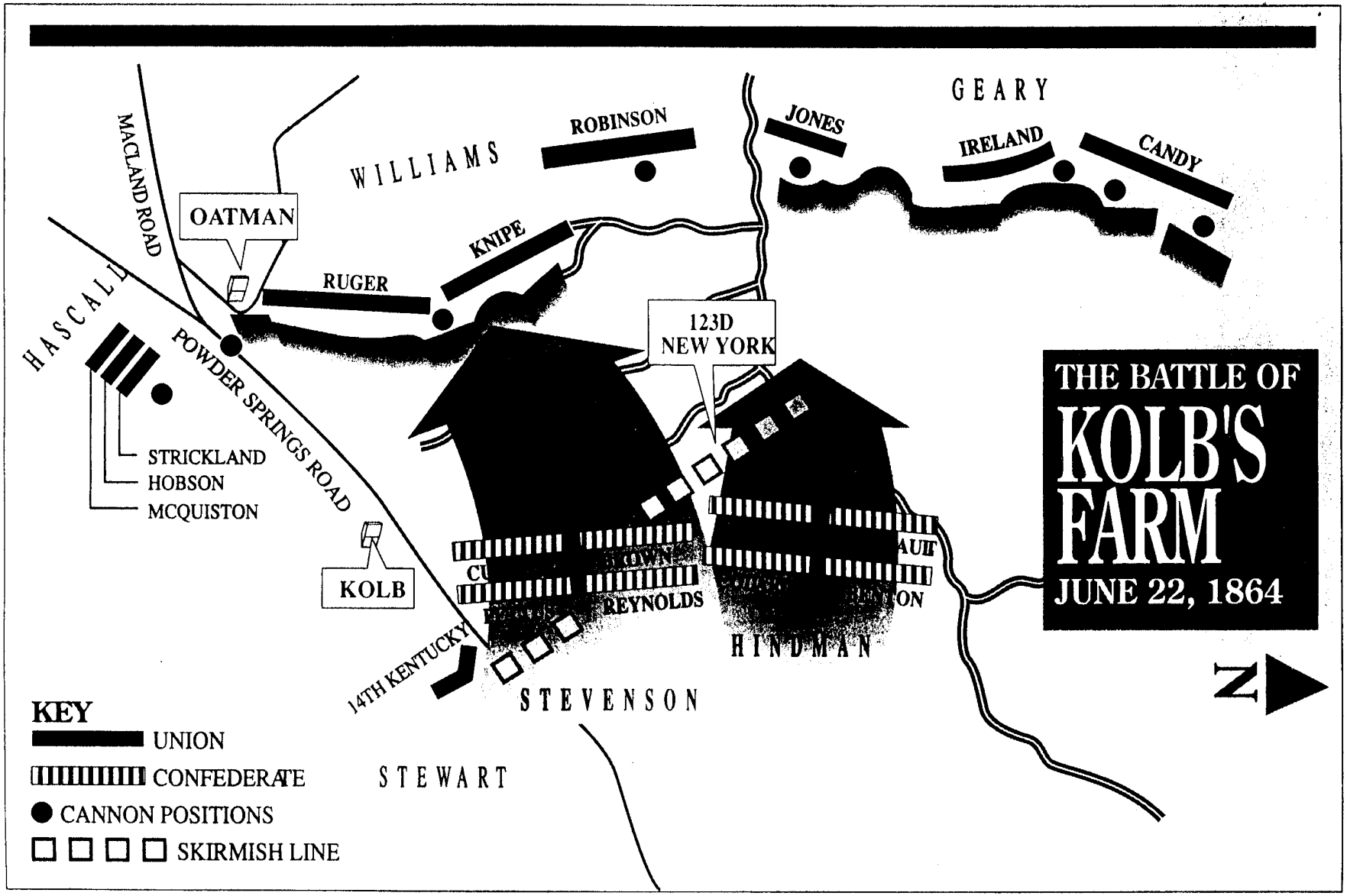
ANNEX E



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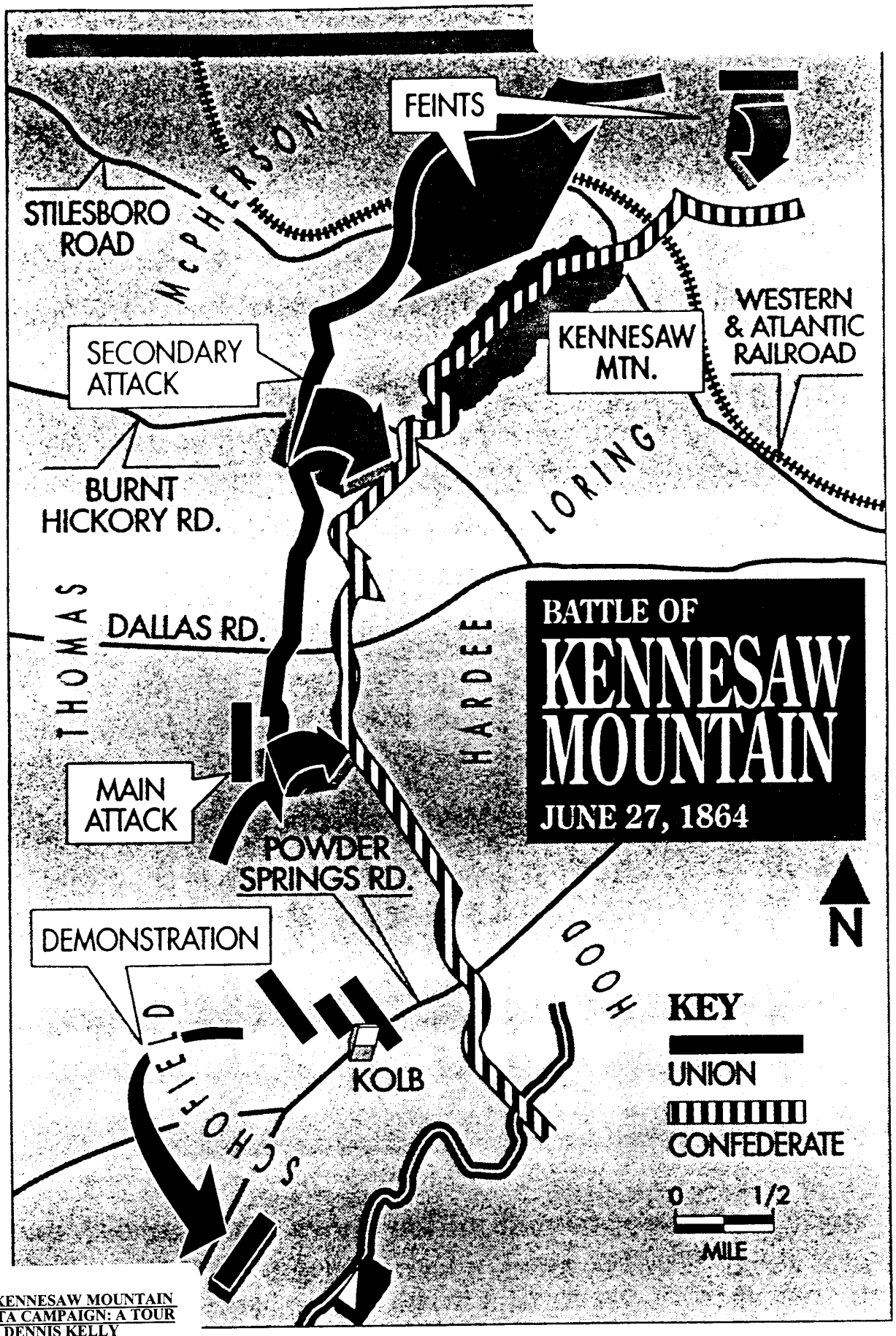

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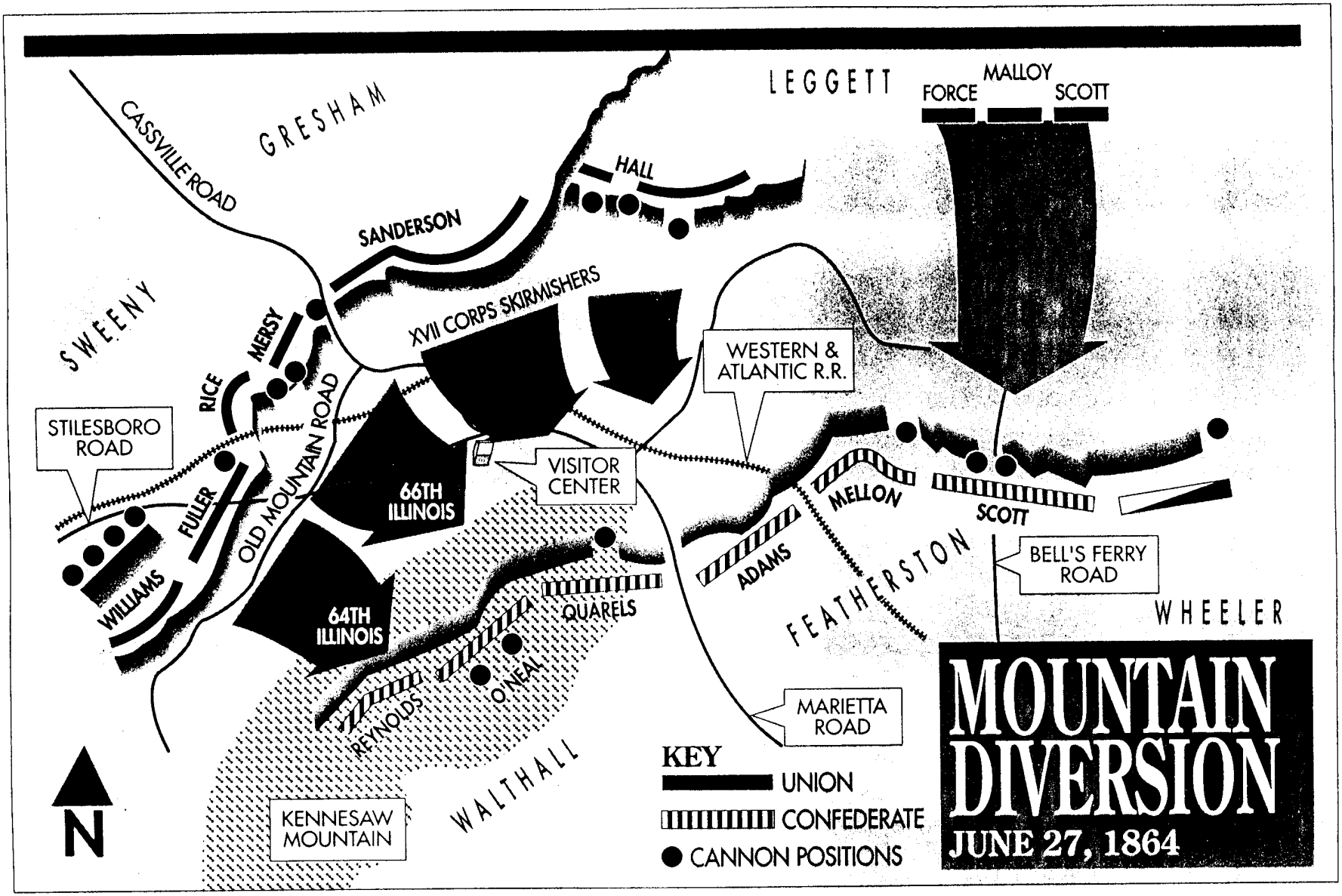

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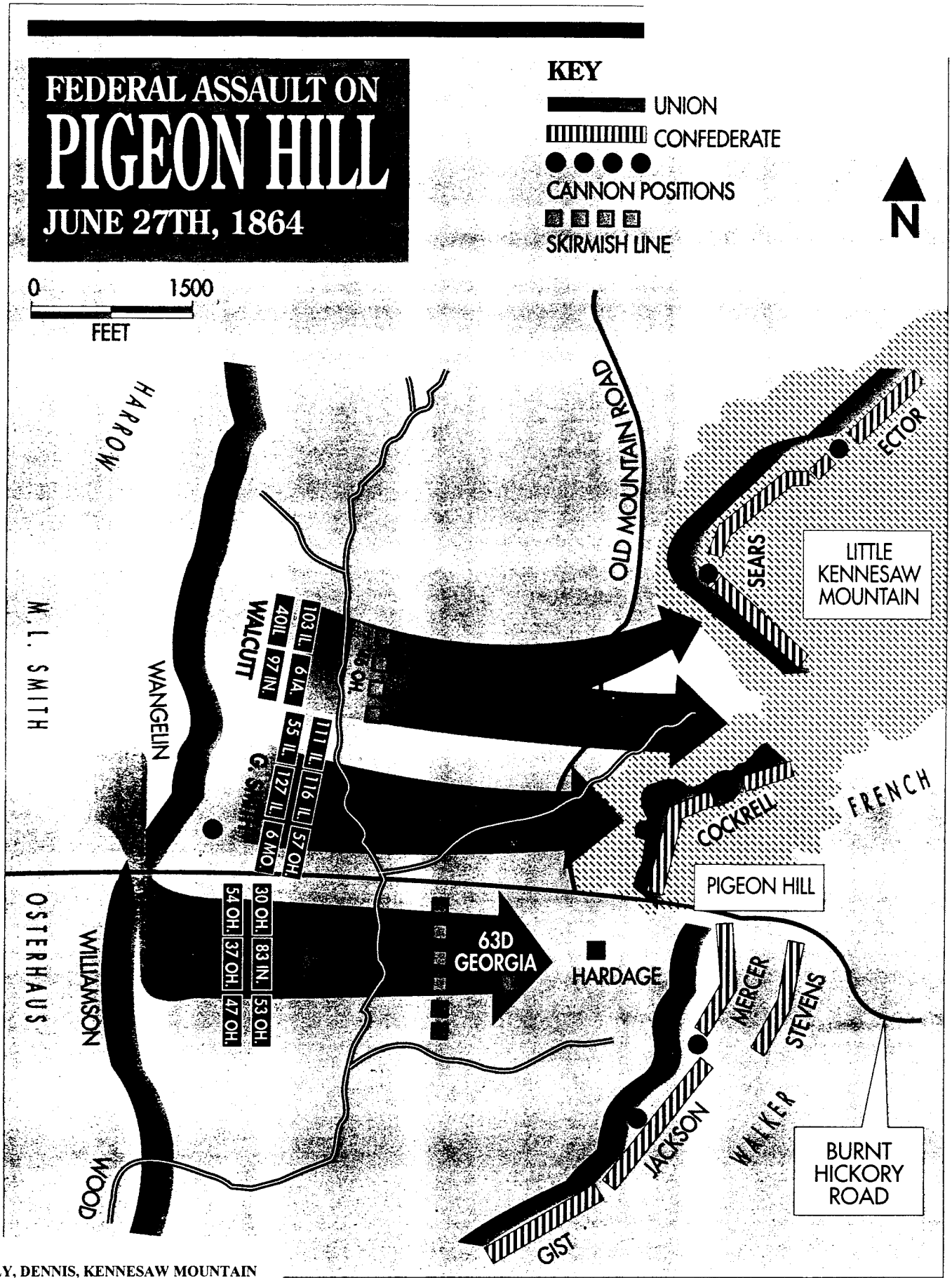
ANNEX G

ANNEX H



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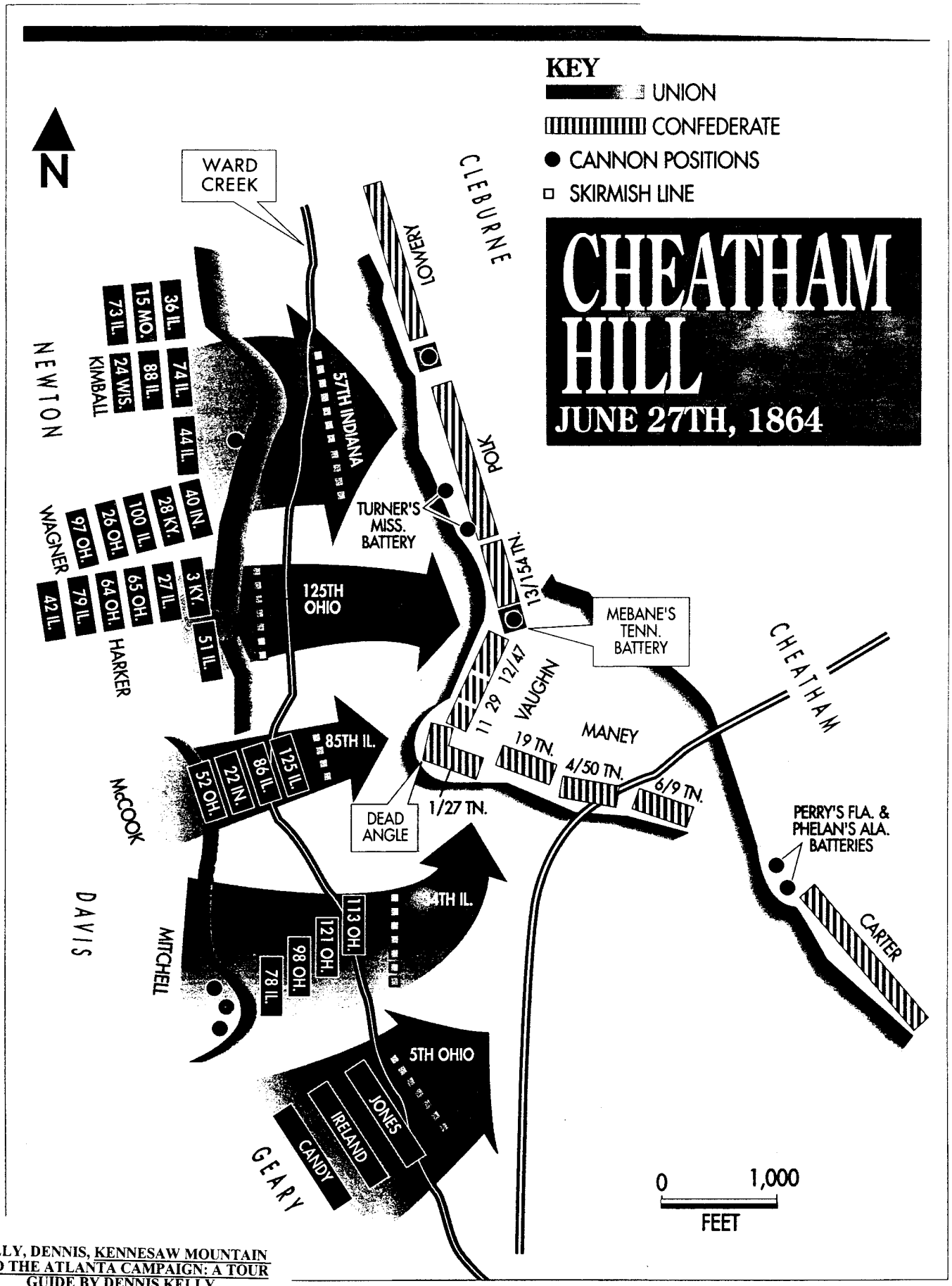
ANNEX I



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ANNEX K

The Union Army

Commanding	**Major General William T. Sherman**
Army of the Cumberland **IV Corps, XIV Corps, XX Corps**	**Major General George H. Thomas**
Army of the Tennessee **XV Corps, XVI Corps, XVII Corps**	**Major General James B. McPherson**
Army of the Ohio **XXIII Corps**	**Major General John M. Schofield**

Totals - 58 Brigades, 20 Divisions, Seven Corps
Operational Strength Approximately 100,000.

The Confederate Army

Commanding	**General Joseph E. Johnston**
Loring's Corps	**Major General W. W. Loring**
Hardee's Corps	**Lieutenant General William J. Hardee**
Hood's Corps	**General John B. Hood**

Totals - 36 Brigades, 13 Divisions, Three Corps
Operational Strength (at its peak) Approximately 70,000.